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Transformational Leaders Know
Themselves Better

Bernard M. Bass and Francis J. Yammarino

ONR-TR-5 ONR

Report Series



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Abstract

Self-rated leadership behavior (transformational, transactional, laissez-faire) was obtained for a representative, random sample of 155 Naval surface fleet officers in parallel to the leadership descriptions for the same dimensions provided by the officers' senior subordinates. In addition, fitness reports completed by the officers' superiors provided performance and promotion data which were indexed as appraisals of the officers' success. The self-ratings tended to be inflated, but the more successful officers were less likely to inflate their self-described leadership behavior. A possible explanation for this effect is that subordinates' descriptions of leadership were significantly related to superiors' ratings of performance and promotion, but self-ratings of leadership were not associated with these measures.

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Transformational Leaders Know Themselves Better

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as other see us!

It wad frae monie a blunder free us

An' foolish notion (Burns, 1785/1974, pp. 43-44).

Burns' insight has been tested in prior work by examining the extent to which the discrepancy between a person's self-ratings and others' ratings about the person are predictive of the person's lack of interpersonal success. In explanation, Reykowski (1982) theorized that a person's self-esteem and the esteem accorded that person would be quite different for persons with extremely low or extremely high self-esteem because they would be too preoccupied with their own concerns to be highly esteemed by others.

Leaders, in general, have been found to be more accurate than followers about the esteem accorded them by others. Jennings (1943) showed in a sociometric analyses in a girls' school that the overchosen, the "stars," appraised themselves more accurately than the underchosen about having good ideas and benefiting others. Green (1948), Greer, Galanter, and Nordlie (1954), Lansing (1957), and Gallo and McClintock (1962) also found leaders more accurate than nonleaders in estimating the sociometric esteem others would accord them. But since leaders compared to nonleaders are more visible and their behavior is more observable, it was to be expected that they would be more in agreement with others about their behavior than would be nonleaders.

Nevertheless, most leaders tend to give themselves an inflated evaluation in contrast to evaluations of them provided by others. For example, they believe they have more important and larger jobs than their

supervisors and subordinates think they have (Haas, Porat, & Vaughan, 1969). The greater the inflation in leaders' self-ratings, the poorer their performance. To illustrate, Ziegenhagen (1964) showed how concepts of the self can be at variance with the outside world and affect a leader's performance. He subjected 15 world class political leaders' autobiographies to content analysis and showed that the leaders' ethnocentric behavior, conformity to ingroup norms, and hostility to outgroups correlated highly with the inconsistencies in the leader's self-conception. These inconsistencies were assessed by the lack of agreement in self-conception and the conception of the individual thought by the leader to be held by others.

The inflated self-evaluation may be a cause of career derailment of leaders. "Success can go to their heads;" they may lose the vestiges of humility and become arrogant (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). The discrepancy will widen between what they think of themselves and what their colleagues think of them. Williams and Leavitt (1947) found that successful leaders were least likely to succumb to inflationary overevaluation of themselves. Wexley, Alexander, Greenwalt and Couch (1980) also obtained results indicating that the absence of such discrepancies between self and other evaluations was beneficial to manager-subordinate dyadic relationships. Subordinates were more satisfied with their managers when there was greater congruence between each subordinate's description of the manager and the manager's self-description.

As will be noted later, the negative impact of inflated self-evaluations may be explained by the tendency of self-ratings to be lower in correlation with criteria and performance measures than others' ratings are with the same performance and criteria measures. Thus, empirically, self-

ratings appear much less likely to relate to supervisors' evaluations than others' ratings of the same employees. According to a meta-analysis by Harris and Schaubroeck (1988), self-ratings are in much less agreement with peer (.36) or supervisors' ratings (.35) than peer and supervisors' ratings are with each other (.62). Supposedly assessing the same behavior, self-ratings are likely to be even lower in correlation with subordinates' ratings.

Purpose

The purpose of the present investigation was to test the hypothesis that, in general, leaders overestimate the frequency of their own leadership behavior in comparison to the ratings obtained from the led. The second hypothesis to be tested is that, compared to unsuccessful leaders, congruence would be greater between successful leaders' self-descriptions and their subordinates' descriptions of their leadership behavior. Linearity was expected in the findings--the more successful the leader, the lower the discrepancy between self and others' ratings of leadership. Unlike most of the previously cited studies, independent criteria were used to gauge leader success in this study. Also, a parsimonious explanation of such results in terms of the lower predictions of the criteria from self-ratings compared to the predictions obtained from others' ratings was examined.

Method

Sample

The leaders in this study were Navy officers, graduates of the United States Naval Academy (USNA), on active duty assigned to the surface warfare fleet. They were a representative random sample of 276 officers holding the ranks of lieutenant or lieutenant junior grade. The requisite complete

data for the present investigation was available for 155 officers. They were all males and their average age was 29. The officers were assigned to a variety of ships ranging from tenders to carriers. They had been in service from four to nine years since graduation from the USNA.

Up to six senior subordinates of each officer were randomly selected and asked to provide information anonymously about the officers. Data from an average of over four subordinates per officer were obtained. Ninety percent were males and most were between 21 and 39 in age. Approximately half of the subordinates were enlisted personnel, mainly noncoms, and half were commissioned officers.

All the focal officer and subordinate survey materials were sent to the Commanding Officer (CO) of the ship on which the personnel were serving. The CO was asked to relay the materials to the appropriate senior subordinates and the focal officers. All returns were made directly to the researchers. Measures

Leadership. The Multifactor Officer Questionnaire (MLQ-Form 11), developed by Bass and Yammarino (1987), was used to collect descriptions of the officers' leadership. This survey assesses transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership (Bass, 1985). Form 11 is a modified version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Avolio, 1989) designed for the military situation. In Form 11, the number of scales was increased and the items were slightly reworded to fit the context. The modified scales displayed adequate reliability, and the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the scales and with criteria followed the same pattern as those for previous versions of the MLQ (Yammarino & Bass, 1989).

The subordinates completed the MLQ about the focal officers and the

officers rated themselves on the MLQ indicating how frequently leadership behaviors were observed or displayed. A five-point format ranging from "not at all" (0) to "frequently, if not always" (4) was employed. These anchors have a magnitude estimation-based ratio to each other of 4:3:2:1:0 (Bass, Cascio, & O'Connor, 1974). For each scale, items were summed and divided by the appropriate number of items forming a scale score that ranged from zero to four. It was deemed appropriate to average subordinates' ratings about a focal officer (see Yammarino & Bass, 1989) and subtract subordinates' mean scores describing the officer on a leadership factor from the officer's own description because the magnitude estimation origin of the anchors had an absolute zero (see Bass, et al., 1974). Discrepancies would be zero when subordinates' descriptions and officers' self-descriptions were the same. A positive discrepancy implied that officers' overevaluated themselves; a negative discrepancy implied that they underevaluated themselves compared to their subordinates' ratings of them.

Discrepancies between self and subordinates' mean responses were obtained for nine leadership scores which were based on the work of Bass (1985). Items supplied by 198 U.S. Army colonels describing their superiors' leadership had been subjected to a response allocation analysis which sorted them into transformational and transactional behaviors. The transformational leader was defined as one who raised awareness and higher level needs of followers and moved them to transcend their own self-interests. This was in contrast to the transactional leader who exchanged promises of rewards for subordinates' compliance. Factor analyses of these items for military and industrial samples (Bass, 1985; Hater & Bass, 1988) disclosed up to eight factors, each of which could be scored separately. A ninth score was generated by partitioning the transactional contingent

rewarding behavior into making promises and providing rewards.

Thus, four transformational, four transactional, and one nonleadership scale were possible. The four transformational leadership scales, the number of items contributing to each, coefficient alphas, and examples of the items were as follows:

1. Charisma (6 items) - "I am ready to trust him/her to overcome any obstacle" ($\alpha = .94$).
2. Individualized Consideration (6 items) - "Gives personal attention to me when necessary" ($\alpha = .86$).
3. Intellectual Stimulation (6 items) - "Shows me how to think about problems in new ways" ($\alpha = .88$).
4. Inspirational Leadership (6 items) - "Provides vision of what lies ahead" ($\alpha = .82$).

The four transactional leadership scales, the number of items contributing to each, coefficient alphas, and examples of the items were as follows:

5. Contingent Promises (3 items) - "Talks about special commendations and promotions for good work" ($\alpha = .67$).
6. Contingent Rewards (3 items) - "Personally pays me a compliment when I do good work" ($\alpha = .91$).
7. Active Management-by-Exception (4 items) - "Would reprimand me if my work was below standard" ($\alpha = .71$).
8. Passive Management-by-Exception (4 items) - "Shows he/she is a firm believer in 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'" ($\alpha = .59$).

The non-leadership scale was:

9. Laissez-Faire (6 items) - "However I do my job is OK with him/her" ($\alpha = .63$).

Criteria for Success as an Officer. Two measures of officer success in the fleet as rated by superior officers were obtained from U.S. Navy records (fitness reports). First, superiors evaluated on a nine-point scale the officers' performance with regard to contributions to the unit's mission, including effective integration of personnel and the mission and completion of assigned tasks. The number of times an officer was given the highest rating on this scale was divided by the total number of evaluations he had received over the years (range = .00 to 1.00, $M = .68$, $SD = .34$). Second, superiors either recommended or did not recommend officers for early promotion. The number of times that an officer was recommended was divided by the total number of evaluations he had received over the years (range = .00 to 1.00, $M = .46$, $SD = .35$).

Results

Means and standard deviations for each of the nine leadership dimensions based on self-ratings, subordinates' ratings, and the difference (discrepancy) between self and subordinates' ratings are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the mean self-ratings were significantly higher than mean subordinates' ratings for the first seven leadership dimensions. In the case of passive management-by-exception, there was no difference between the self and subordinates' ratings. Officers thought they displayed significantly less laissez-faire behavior (nonleadership) than was attributed to them by their subordinates. Thus, they saw themselves more favorably than did their subordinates. Except for passive management-by-exception, therefore, these results provide support for the first hypothesis.

The overevaluation of one's leadership ranged from nearly a whole anchor point (.94) in the case of contingent reward behavior to about one-

quarter point (.28) for active management-by-exception. In fact, except for passive management-by-exception, all the self minus subordinates' ratings discrepancy mean scores were significantly different from zero ($p \geq .01$).

The mean discrepancies for the four transformational leadership dimensions ranged from .49 (charisma) to .64 (inspirational leadership). For the significant mean discrepancies for the transactional leadership dimensions, scores varied from .28 (active management-by-exception) to .94 (contingent rewards). The mean discrepancy for laissez-faire leadership was -.39. Although this is an underevaluation by focal officers, the pattern is compatible with the other dimensions because the officers rated themselves less on non-leadership than did their subordinates.

Insert Table 1 about here

Correlational Analysis

As a first test of the second hypothesis, product-moment correlations of self and subordinates' ratings of leadership, and the association of these ratings with indexes of success as rated by superiors are presented in Table 2. Except for charisma, individualized consideration, and contingent rewards, self and subordinates' ratings of the same leadership dimension were not correlated. Moreover, self-ratings of leadership were not related to either performance or promotability as rated by superiors. However, except for passive management-by-exception, subordinates' leadership ratings were significantly predictive of the two criterion indexes of successful performance and recommendations for early promotion. Laissez-faire leadership was significantly negatively associated with the criteria.

The differential predictive ability of the criteria from self as

compared to subordinates' ratings and the discrepancy between these ratings resulted in negative correlations between the discrepancy scores and the criteria (positive for laissez-faire). In terms of significant results, the greater the overevaluated self-ratings on charisma, intellectual stimulation, and contingent rewards, the lower were recommendations received for early promotion (-.22, -.22, and -.16, respectively). The greater the overevaluation of charisma, the lower were the superior-judged performance reports (-.26). Likewise, the greater the underevaluated self-ratings in laissez-faire, the lower were recommendations for early promotion (.18).

Insert Table 2 about here

Analysis of Variance

As a further test of the second hypothesis, the effects of transformational and transactional leadership on the two criterion variables combined were examined using univariate and multivariate analysis of variance. To discern whether the discrepancy effects were linear for unsuccessful to successful officers, the 155 officers were divided into three groups as follows: (A) those officers who were rated above the median in the proportion of times they received both early recommendations for promotion and top category performance ratings; (B) those officers who were above the median in the proportion of times they received either recommendation for early promotion or top category performance ratings; and (C) those officers who were rated below the median in the proportion of times they received both early recommendations for promotion and top category performance ratings. The correlation between the two criteria was .65 ($p \leq .001$) indicating that a single criterion was reliable and could be formed. The new criterion distribution of officers was symmetrical. Of the

155, 35 were in category A (high performance and high promotability), 87 were in category B (in-between group), and 33 were in category C (low performance and low promotability).

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the differences in discrepancy scores among the three groups of officers (A, B, and C) for the four transformational leadership measures as a whole. A second MANOVA was conducted for two types of contingent reward behavior (promises and rewards), and a third MANOVA was conducted for two types of management-by-exception behavior (active and passive). Univariate F tests also were computed for each of the discrepancies on the nine leadership measures to assess the effects across unsuccessful, in-between, and successful groups of officers. These results are presented in Table 3.

Mean discrepancy scores for the three groups of officers on the nine leadership dimensions and univariate ANOVA results are shown in the table. The officers overevaluated their leadership behavior in contrast to what their subordinates said of them at all levels of criterion performance. This pattern also held for passive management-by-exception and laissez-faire which were underevaluated by the officers, but which are also negative forms of leadership or non-leadership. With the exception of passive management-by-exception, the mean discrepancies for the three categories of officers on all the dimensions of leadership generally differ significantly from zero.

The MANOVA results for the four transformational leadership dimensions were significant at the .07 level (Mult $F = 1.80$). Consistent with the correlations in Table 2, the second hypothesis was supported by the trend in mean discrepancy results that emerged for charismatic leadership and intellectual stimulation. But the trend was clearly linear only for charismatic leadership. For individualized consideration and inspirational

leadership, although the C criterion group (poor performers) exhibited higher discrepancy scores than did the other two criterion groups, A and B, the results were not statistically significant. The pattern of results was clearest for charismatic leadership. The three mean discrepancy results for the most successful, in-between, and least successful officers were respectively .248, .401, and .861. The univariate *F* test was significant at the .02 level. The most successful officers were least likely to overevaluate their charisma.

In terms of transactional leadership, the MANOVA results for the dimensions involving contingent reward (promises and rewards) were significant at the .10 level (Multi *F* = 1.90). But the MANOVA results for active and passive management-by-exception were not significant (Multi *F* = 1.00). The univariate *F*-test was significant at the .07 level for contingent rewards. The hypothesized linear pattern of results emerged for this dimension for the A, B, and C criterion groups of officers (.703, .931, and 1.114, respectively). The univariate results for contingent promises were not statistically significant, but the same pattern was evident. Active management-by-exception (.129, .226, and .493, respectively for the A, B, and C officers) also showed a linear trend, but the effect was not statistically significant. Passive management-by-exception and laissez-faire leadership did not display this trend. However, for laissez-faire, the least successful group was most prone to this tendency (-.577) in contrast to the two more successful criterion groups (-.350, -.317, respectively). These differences between groups were statistically significant at the .09 level.

Insert Table 3 about here

Extremes Analysis

The in-between criterion group (B) of officers was eliminated to perform an analysis of extreme groups (results not shown). Mean discrepancy scores for criterion group A (most successful officers) were compared to those for criterion group C (least successful officers) on each of the nine leadership dimensions. Univariate ANOVA results were statistically significant at the .02 to .09 level for differences between the A and C criterion groups for six of the leadership dimensions: charismatic leadership, intellectual stimulation, contingent rewards, contingent promises, active management-by-exception, and laissez-faire leadership. In each of these cases, the most successful officers displayed lower discrepancies and less overevaluations than did the most unsuccessful officers.

Discussion and Conclusions

In general, the results of this study provide support for the hypotheses of investigation. Although some of the findings were of marginal significance, for more successful officers lower discrepancies between self and subordinates' ratings of leadership were displayed in contrast to less successful officers for whom the discrepancies were greater. Moreover, self-ratings were generally inflated in comparison to subordinates' ratings of leadership across all officers, successful and nonsuccessful. The results also indicate that self-ratings of leadership failed to be predictive of performance and promotability of the 155 Naval officers while the parallel subordinates' ratings were predictive of these criteria.

These results have several implications for future research and practice. First, they suggest that more accurate insight into one's own

leadership behavior may have value for predicting future success as a leader beyond the use of subordinates' descriptions alone. Second, the results lend support to the use of survey feedback as a key method for leadership training. That is, subordinates and/or colleagues provide descriptions of the officers' leadership behavior. These descriptions are then compared with the officers' self-descriptions, and subsequent training focuses on trying to narrow the gaps between self and others' descriptions. Third, the results provide the rationale for using a declining discrepancy score between self and others' leadership descriptions as a measure of improvement from before to after such training.

Support was uniform for the contention that the leaders, in general, overestimated the frequency of their leadership actions in comparison to their subordinates' descriptions. This points to the exaggerated results that are likely to be endemic in all studies that depend solely on self-reports, self-descriptions, and self-evaluations by the leaders. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the data from surveys and interviews with leaders themselves need to be adjusted for self-serving bias. At the same time, in general, leaders with higher performance appraisals from their superiors do provide a less inflated estimate of their leadership compared to their subordinates' descriptions. Future work is needed in this area to further clarify the associations among self-ratings, self-other discrepancies, and leader performance.

In future work, rather than focusing solely on self-ratings in relation to subordinates' ratings, a more useful strategy would be to more directly assess the agreement in ratings between focal leaders and subordinates. This can be accomplished by having a focal leader provide information about his/her relationship with each subordinate, and at the same time, each

subordinate provides data about his/her relationship with a focal leader. These reports then can be "matched," and using procedures developed by Dansereau, Alutto, and Yammarino (1984), analyses can be conducted to determine the degree of leader-subordinate dyadic agreement. Such an approach may clarify further the results of this study as well as the findings in the literature on self and others' ratings. In sum, "know thyself" remains as valid a piece of advice today as it was for the Greek philosophers.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Leadership Measures by Raters

| Leadership (N = 155) | | Self-Ratings | Subordinates' Ratings | Self Minus Subordinate Ratings |
|----------------------------|----|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Charisma | M | 2.91 | 2.40*** | .49** |
| | SD | .71 | 1.16 | .98 |
| Individual Consideration | M | 3.09 | 2.50*** | .59** |
| | SD | .60 | .91 | .76 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | M | 3.09 | 2.47*** | .64** |
| | SD | .54 | .88 | .79 |
| Inspirational Leadership | M | 2.76 | 2.26*** | .50** |
| | SD | .53 | .83 | .75 |
| Contingent Promises | M | 2.26 | 1.61*** | .66** |
| | SD | .70 | .92 | .88 |
| Contingent Rewards | M | 3.32 | 2.38*** | .94** |
| | SD | .72 | 1.10 | .89 |
| Active Mgmt.-by-Exception | M | 2.90 | 2.65*** | .28** |
| | SD | .63 | .85 | .79 |
| Passive Mgmt.-by-Exception | M | 2.19 | 2.26 | -.06 |
| | SD | .75 | .82 | .83 |
| Laissez-Faire | M | .91 | 1.31*** | -.39** |
| | SD | .50 | .67 | .61 |

***p ≤ .001; Mean self-rating is significantly different from mean subordinates' rating.

**p ≤ .01; Mean discrepancy (self minus subordinate) is significantly different from zero.

Table 2

Correlations Among Self and Subordinates' Ratings of Leadership and Superiors' Ratings of Performance and Early Promotion

| Leadership (N = 155) | Correlations of Self with Subordinates Ratings of Leadership | Superior Rated Performance | | | Superior Rated Early Promotion | | |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | Correlated with Leadership | | Self Minus Other Difference | Correlated with Leadership | | Self Minus Other Difference |
| | | Self-Ratings | Subordinate Ratings | | Self-Ratings | Subordinate Ratings | |
| Charisma | .21** | .08 | .38** | -.26** | .13 | .37** | -.22** |
| Individual Consideration | .21** | .07 | .21** | -.09 | .09 | .24** | -.09 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | .00 | .08 | .31** | -.15 | .02 | .34** | -.22** |
| Inspirational Leadership | .04 | .02 | .25** | -.15 | .08 | .28** | -.13 |
| Contingent Promises | .08 | -.04 | .17* | -.14 | -.02 | .17* | -.12 |
| Contingent Rewards | .24** | .07 | .20* | -.11 | .03 | .24** | -.16* |
| Active Mgmt.-by-Exception | .09 | .09 | .22** | -.04 | .07 | .28** | -.11 |
| Passive Mgmt.-by-Exception | .13 | -.11 | -.05 | -.07 | -.14 | -.04 | -.10 |
| Laissez-Faire | .12 | -.05 | -.31** | .14 | .00 | -.31** | .18* |

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$

Table 3

Discrepancies Between Self and Subordinates
Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire Scores Related to
Performance and Recommendations for Early Promotion
Received by Navy Officers from Their Superiors (N = 155)

| Leadership | Mean Discrepancy Based On Performance and Promotability Groups | | | Univariate Results | |
|---------------------------|---|----------|----------|--------------------|-----|
| | A (N=35) | B (N=87) | C (N=33) | F-Test | P |
| Charisma | .248 | .401 | .861 | 3.9 | .02 |
| Individual Consideration | .595 | .526 | .709 | .6 | .52 |
| Intellectual Stimulation | .504 | .527 | .985 | 3.9 | .02 |
| Inspirational Leadership | .399 | .411 | .694 | 1.2 | .29 |
| Contingent Promises | .607 | .547 | .994 | 1.6 | .19 |
| Contingent Rewards | .703 | .931 | 1.114 | 2.7 | .07 |
| Active Mgmt-by-Exception | .129 | .226 | .493 | 1.6 | .21 |
| Passive Mgmt-by-Exception | -.174 | -.047 | -.056 | .5 | .61 |
| Laissez-Faire | -.350 | -.317 | -.577 | 2.4 | .09 |

Note: A = high performance and promotability group of officers; C = low performance and promotability group of officers; B = in-between group of officers.

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